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Vocational education in the Nordic countries – The historical evolution

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BOOK REVIEW

Vocational education in the Nordic countries – The historical evolution, edited by Svein Michelsen and Marja-Leena Stenström, London, Routledge, 2018, 239 pp., £115 (Hardback), ISBN 978-1-138-22085-0

This book is the result of a collaboration between researchers who have long-standing research experience in the field of Vocational Education and Training or education and work-based learning. Furthermore, this publication is the first part of a greater project, which is including a second book, named 'Vocational education in the Nordic countries – Learning from diversity', edited by Christian Helms Jørgensen, Ole Johnny Olsen and Daniel Persson Thunqvist, published in the same year. The editors of this second part are also contributing to this book. It is of interest that the Nordic countries-VET-project was sponsored by the 'NordForsk research programme for Education for Tomorrow'.

The design to provide a historical and a subsequent systematic part recalls the classical approach of 'Geisteswissenschaften' and Philosophy, establishing a comprehensive and fully explored scientific account in order to trace the evolution and elaborate the essence of a phenomenon. But such a strong epistemological interest is not the focus of the two books, which are oriented more towards the interesting perspective that although the Nordic countries have similar economies and similar education systems, the VET systems differ considerably. Why did this occur? And a second perspective, which is called in international comparative research a melioration approach, aiming to learn from these identified differences. Indeed, this enterprise is impressive and leads to the conjecture, that over the next years no one can overlook these publications in order to talk competently about the Nordic VET systems.

The Nordic history of VET is organised around different chapters, including countries like Denmark (2 chapters authored by Christian Helms Jørgensen and 1 co-authored by Gudmund Bøndergaard), Norway (2 chapters authored by Svein Michelsen and Hakon Host), Sweden (2 chapters by Jonas Olofsson and Daniel Persson Thunqvist) and Finland (2 chapters provided by Marija-Leena Stenström and Maarit Virolainen). The introduction and the conclusion are presented by one of the editors, Svein Michelsen.

The common effort in this book is to draft an evolutionary trajectory beginning from 1850 and ending in the present days, 2015. This periodisation of history suggests a systematic dimension. However, this systematic view is only roughly given. The detailed presentations of countries in the chapters are different. In a way, they follow at the beginning a common narrative. First, they were guilds, then there was a crisis and in some countries, apprenticeships flourished again, or were in an upward movement. However, in a later period, school-based systems gained ground. The several chapters focus on political and legislative turnarounds and not so much on the economic development as an explanation for the development of VET and certain forms. Some contributors (like the Norwegian colleagues) profile the VET system in the context of mass education and the general education, others (like Finland) are more exclusively focused on VET. It is a pity that the structuring criterions of presentation are


not consistent, so it sometimes looks like different country-reports were put together. It is understandable that national data gathering and the availability is quite different; nevertheless, there would have been an opportunity here to make a stronger comparative focus. By the way it would have been helpful to clarify more thoroughly how the data and the methodology of this book have been provided, if there is more an analysis of secondary sources like in the country-specific periods before World War II, or as presented in the after-war cases, based on official statistics or own provided or re-analysed data. Having said that, it is very helpful that in the conclusions the trajectories in all countries are presented in tables and in common head-lines: the liberalisation of VET (1850–1945), the social democratic regime (1945–1990) and the last phase, called again liberalisation (1990 and onwards). It would have been worthwhile to scrutinise exactly the first long period (nearly 100 years) more deeply and perhaps to refine the long-standing 19th Century period in smaller parts. E.g. for the primary school system the nation building was an important driver and in Germany, at the beginning of the 20th Century also in VET, the nation was a strong argument. The fact that German classical vocational pedagogy (and one of his representatives Georg Kerschensteiner) was also noticed and discussed, e.g., in Norway would suggest such an enlarged element of analysis.

The authors very much rely on the approach of historical institutionalism and on the perspective scholars around varieties of capitalism have developed. This approach has many advantages. The strength is the analytical and comparative view on different systems, which inform the readers about relevant issues, which were crucial for developing a vocational education system. The weakness is the exclusive focus for each country on one national system which is included in this perspective and the limitation on 'skill systems'. Out of scope are local and diverse developments within a country and the more general aspects of education, which are not driven by economic needs or firm-based decisions. That is why recent research in historical institutionalism stresses more often the influences of parties and the state. Mixed or hybrid systems are co-existing in northern countries, as Svein Michelsen also points out in the final reflections, bringing in a 'possible Nordic model', which is referring to the trade-off between VET and Higher Education, described as 'social democratic skill formation system' (p. 225 f.).

The book is quite descriptive but nevertheless leads to a strong thesis, which makes the different national pathways plausible. The narrative of incremental change, which is in line with the historical institutionalism is also confirmed in all chapters. Sweden is different from Norway, and Norway again different from Denmark. And not very surprisingly, Finland is very different from the other cases, and Denmark and Sweden are very different systems in relation to VET. What is lacking is a clear reflective approach about the dynamics of these different developments in all these countries. Of course, it is quite unique and challenging not to foster one but a set of countries.

The background and aim of the study are – as Christian Helms Jørgensen concludes in his part about Denmark – is to identify the weakness of a (national) system at home like the training placements (p. 183 ff.) and to manage the trade-offs in VET. The findings itself suggest common concerns which nevertheless led to different developments. Once a pathway has been established it is difficult to jump to another model. This 'common' trend is observable also in other (European) countries. Thus, in order to understand the changes and the governance of Vocational Education and Training systems, but also in trying to establish new and sustainable reforms, a historical perspective is indispensable.

Insofar the book offers really new insights as is announced in the introduction and brings together different developments and options for VET reforms.

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